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Migration of the Butterfly

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I recently graduated from UK with a B.A. in English. I'm a two-time second-place recipient of the Oswald Research and Creativity prize for, well, *creativity* (a badge I proudly wear). I plan to attend Rosemont College in 2006 to pursue a Master of Fine Arts degree in Creative Writing. My story, *Migration of the Butterfly*, formed part of my writing sample for Rosemont's application; it has also appeared in my self-published collection, *Written In Red*, as well as part of a serialization in *Suture*, an online e-zine. It is the end result of a month-long project for Dr. Campbell's class on Geoffrey Chaucer during the Fall semester of 2004.

Rather than write a 20-page essay on the similarities between X, Y, and Z in Chaucer's canon, I pitched this idea to Dr. Campbell: a modern, prose interpretation of the poetic structure used in Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*. He embraced the idea, despite its bloody nature, and encouraged me to pursue it. I am happy to say that, over the course of the semester, he became more than a mentor — he also became a friend. He respected my love for prose enough that he gave me a chance.

What you have before you is an excerpt from the result of that chance (the entire novella is available in the on-line version of *Kaleidoscope* at <http://www.uky.edu/kaleidoscope/fall2005>); it is a piece of prose that still ruminates within my thoughts. So much so, in fact, that I am currently working on expanding the novella into a novel. I'm also involved in a series of writing projects, most of which can be found at <http://alienhead.deviantart.com>, which is my current online portfolio. I welcome any and all means of feedback and correspondence directed to the email address listed on the site, so feel free to drop me a line.



Mentor:
William R. Campbell, Professor Emeritus,
Department of English

In the full version of "Migration of the Butterfly," Todd Keisling has written an extraordinary and fascinating story of mystery and revenge, of the ordinary combined with the horrific. The full tale requires of the reader not only careful attention to skillfully interwoven strands of plot but also a willingness to endure some scenes not for the faint hearted. The reader who gives time and care to the whole will come away greatly rewarded by Keisling's insight and skill.

From his carefully woven tale, *Kaleidoscope* presents one part, a self-contained story that in some ways contains and vividly represents the whole.

Originally, Keisling thought of the possibilities of a series of modern tales patterned after the scheme of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*: different kinds of people brought together in one place, with each giving his or her self-revealing perspective on events. Chaucer's *Tales* remain a series of fine fragments, the author's death leaving the whole without narrative completion. Fascinated by Chaucer's idea and with great respect for that Medieval master, Keisling has carefully studied to allow his characters their individual ways of seeing and saying; and he has worked to bring a coherence and completeness to his own story, creating an ending that is both disturbing and satisfying.

Migration of the Butterfly

*This is an excerpt from a novella.
The entire novella is available on-line at
<http://www.uky.edu/kaleidoscope/fall2005>.*

The Case of Betsy Wilmot

Betsy Wilmot first noticed them while walking back from her evening History class. They were hanging around the entrance to the classroom building — one tall, clad in a torn, white t-shirt with a chain running out of his shorts pocket; the other a bit shorter, with one of those "Gettin' Lucky in Kentucky" shirts and a blue sports equipment bag slung over one shoulder. The one with the chain smiled at her. It made her shiver but she ignored it. She gripped her canes a bit tighter, shrugged her shoulders to adjust her purse and kept on.

The shortcut between the classroom building and chemistry lab was dim; a single streetlamp lit the alley, obscured by the swaying limbs of an adjacent tree. A few dead leaves swirled in front of her and crunched beneath her feet. She smiled at the sound. This was her favorite time of year, after all. Betsy squinted her eyes from the blowing wind. It was a cold night — cold for September at least — and it gave her chills.

She paused for a moment in the dim light and checked her watch. Four minutes to eight. Betsy gripped her canes again and tried to walk faster. The alley gave way to an open courtyard behind the chemistry lab. Her canes clicked against the pale cobblestone, and hearing it made her grind her teeth. She hated that noise.

Almost there, she thought. I'm coming, Mom.

Her mother was waiting for her around the corner, just beyond the courtyard and past the chemistry building. There she would be parked along the street somewhere. It was their daily rendezvous point. There her mother would leave her in mid-afternoon every day for Calculus and await her return from History every evening. At first her mother had insisted she not walk alone, but Betsy had rolled her eyes. She was in college now. She had argued that she had to be on her own at some time, that now was better than later.

Betsy had won, but it hadn't been easy. It felt good to be free of her mother's watchful eye. Now, defiant, she made her way between the two buildings with ease. She knew the path well, though she had taken great pains to keep it a secret from mommy-dearest. If her mother had known she was taking shortcuts through dark alleys . . .

She grinned. What mother didn't know would not hurt her.

The rubber stubs of her canes clicked against the damp cobblestone. It seemed to grow louder with each methodic step.

Click.

Her hate for that sound made it more pronounced, more amplified.

Click.

Betsy stopped for a moment to catch her breath and relish the partial silence. Around her, dead leaves scraped across the cobblestone and trees rustled in the breeze. She closed her eyes, took one final whiff of that musty dead-leaf smell and went about her way.

Behind her, somewhere, there were steps. She ignored them at first, keeping her eyes poised ahead, lifting one cane after another and still cringing at each subsequent click. In her mind she saw her mother waiting patiently in their truck, listening to some outdated country singer and sipping on a bottle of V8.

The steps neared, and their pitter-patter against the cobblestone walkway broke her focus. They had grown faster, louder. She was in mid-turn when her vision went blurry. Colors invaded the blur, swirling around like a kaleidoscope. Her body became weightless; the canes slipped from her hands, and she could almost hear herself yelp in pain, but even that was distant. Somewhere, far away, a man was laughing.

She floated in an endless void for a moment, her vision clouded with sparkles of red and purple, fading to black and back again. Then came the sensation of movement. Force. Someone was lifting her up. Against something hard. *The wall*, her mind told her, but the thought was fleeting. Colors swirled in and out of her vision, and recognition began to stab its way into her consciousness one pin-prick at a time.

Betsy blinked and it made her head throb. A pain stabbed its way down the side of her face to the base of her neck. That's where she was held now. A hand gripped her throat. Colors swam before her eyes — bright sparkles of blue and red, accompanied by a sickening black that threatened to swallow her. She tried to speak. Couldn't. Instead the pounding of her skull spoke for her in quiet pulses.

"Hey Clayton, check this out!"

The grip around her throat loosened, and some of the floating colors cleared long enough so she could see. The man in the "Gettin' Lucky" shirt was holding her canes, his arms fitted into their arm-braces, and he moved around like a robot. Seeing this brought back memories from childhood. One time in seventh grade when Jimmy Howell had made it a point to tell everyone in homeroom that she was a walking vegetable came to mind. Watching the man play around with her canes made her recall all the things little Jimmy (*little retard*) had said. How many times had she tried to explain cerebral palsy to people? The answer didn't come. Betsy closed her eyes and tried to blink everything away. She wanted to be a million miles from here.

There was warmth on her cheek — she figured it to be blood. Wet, seeming to boil across her skin, she could feel it trickling down. The one holding her by the throat turned back to her, almost nose to nose. His breath stank of garlic and beer.

"Stop fuckin' around, Jeb. Check her purse."

"A'ight, man, hold yer horses."

Clayton tightened his grip once more. Betsy wanted to look him in the eye, but she could not bring herself to do it. She felt warmth elsewhere now, between her legs and slipping further down the inside of her thighs. The warmth was replaced by the cold air of the night, and her legs began to shake. It was freezing.

"M-mister," Betsy choked out. "You c-can have whatever you w-want, okay? Just d-don't —"

"Hey Jeb," Clayton grinned. "The 'tard can speak!"

Stars exploded before her eyes, and everything became mute. Sounds and colors were dimmed — for a moment all she could hear was a sharp ringing. He had hit her again — hard — and now she'd decided it was all for nothing. There was no use in trying to bargain. Somewhere between the ringing and throbs, a thought came to her: *No more late classes for me.*

Off in the blurry darkness came laughter.

"Jesus, Clay, knock her fuckin' head off next time, will ya?"

"Blow me. What'd you find, anyway?"

There were more sounds — keys, loose change, metallic items clanging together, even tiny rattling — and her vision started to come back, slow at first, fading in like a television screen. It was then that she noticed it — a faint light just beyond her attacker's head, obscured by the shadow of a building just across the way. At first she thought it was another floater of color, a bright halogen bulb of pain flicked on by Clayton's closed fist, but as things grew back into bright, agonizing clarity, she became aware that it wasn't anything of the sort.

It was real; dull orange, almost red, fading slowly in and out, lulling her like a child's night-light.

"Pills?"

"Yeah," Jeb said. "Coupl'a bottles here."

Clayton looked into her eyes.

"Any cash in there, you retarded bitch?"

"N-n-n—"

He shoved her head against the wall.

"Huh? Can't talk, feeb?"

Clayton slid his hand down between Betsy's thighs.

"Hey Clay, man, take it easy —"

Betsy began to sob. Her eyes filled with tears which spilled over to her cheeks. She couldn't look at them. Her heart had fallen out of her chest when he asked about money. Lately she'd taken to the habit of leaving her money at home, because . . .

All the recent muggings, she thought. Mother insisted. Thanks, Mom. But deep down she knew she couldn't blame her mother. No, she was the one who decided to walk this secluded path in the dark; the one who expected to be impervious to white trash assailants.

She began to laugh. It took Clayton and Jeb by surprise. They paused and stared at her. Through the tears, that glassy wetness which dominated her vision, she could see the speck of orange glow bright one last time. It hovered in the air, a bright burning ghost in the shadows, and then fell to the ground, breaking apart upon contact.

"Bitch . . ."

She felt her head slap against the concrete wall again. Her laughter died.

They're going to kill me, she thought. They're going to—

"Um . . . Clay?"

Betsy opened her eyes. At first all she saw was an inky void swimming in the forefront of her vision, and then Clayton's form started to come into focus. The back of his head, rather. There was movement behind him. Footsteps came to her ears, and somewhere out of that crawling shadow behind them stepped a tall man, his head bowed slightly. Dark-

ness covered his eyes and most of his face. His black coat seemed to stretch to the ground, to fade in with the shadow behind him, as if they were one.

Clayton's grip loosened again.

"Who the fuck are you?"

The man took a few steps forward. His head remained in a half-cocked bow, hands in his pockets. Jeb lifted Betsy's canes and pointed them at him.

"You stay put, fucker. This ain't no concern of yours."

The stranger remained silent. Clayton looked at Jeb, shrugged and let go of Betsy entirely. She slumped to the ground, coughing and gasping for air.

Clayton crossed his arms.

"I suggest you go 'bout your business, buddy."

Betsy gulped the air. It was cold, clean — her breath puffed out before her like smoke. She could make a getaway now if she wanted to, even if it meant crawling without her canes, and the thought made her cheeks flush. That time in seventh grade came back to her; that time when little Jimmy Howell had pushed her down in the hallway. She'd had to crawl while all her classmates stood and laughed.

She blinked away tears and focused on the trio of men standing before her. The man from the shadows continued to stand in silence. His hands were shoved deep into the pockets of his coat.

Clayton motioned to Jeb.

"Fuck 'em up."

"A'ight you tall stack of shit . . ." Jeb dropped the cane, bent down, picked up a baseball bat. That's when she noticed the equipment bag lying empty on the pavement. Betsy's head throbbed at the sight of it.

Jeb took a step toward the man.

"Last chance, pal."

The man raised his head and lifted his hands from his pockets. Shadows seemed to drip off his face, and Betsy was certain he was smiling, but a glint of light distracted her eyes. He held a small, metal bar in each gloved hand. Dim light from the solitary streetlamp reflected off them.

Jeb glanced at Clayton. Betsy saw the look on his face. *He's nervous, she thought.*

It happened fast — at first Betsy couldn't believe it. Didn't want to. Jeb wasted no time. He made his move, ready to swing, but he'd taken no more than a few steps when the man shrugged off his coat. It glided through the air, wrapping around the bat, and it only took a quick tug to pull Jeb forward. The man tripped him, spinning on his feet almost as quick to follow Jeb down to the asphalt.

Jeb grunted, cursed. The man landed on top of him, knees into Jeb's back. Another flash of metal caught Betsy's eyes, and she watched in transfixed

horror as the man flicked his wrists twice, the bars in his hands becoming blades.

The flash of light from the blade forced an image of Betsy's brother to play back in her head. He had cut himself so many times trying to master his butterfly knife. *Two turns*, she thought. *Two turns and that's all it takes . . .*

"Jeb!" Clayton shrieked. He started to run toward them but was too late. The man drove both blades into the back of Jeb's neck once, then again into the sides. Blood sprayed onto the sidewalk. Jeb gurgled, tried to free himself, twitched. Fell limp.

Betsy wanted to scream, to vomit. Nothing came. For a moment there was arid silence. Clayton stood, horrified. He took a step but that was as far as he got. The man was upon him in seconds, leaping with knives bared. He fell backward, tried to scream, but a knife silenced him. It sliced his jugular like paper, and Betsy braced herself against the wall when it began to spray. The man went to work, flaying open Clayton's shirt, tearing into his stomach.

He made no sound; aside from her beating heart, all Betsy could hear were the blades ripping through Clayton's body, through muscle and flesh, sinew, tissue — the thought made her so nauseous, but still, nothing would come. She watched as he tore into Clayton, shredding his torso, exposing muscle and bone. Bits of his intestines flew into the air, a small chunk landing on her sneaker, finally prompting her gag reflex to do its job.

She grimaced at the taste of bile and wiped her mouth with a shaky hand. When she looked again, the man was standing before her. His hands, clothes, face — all were covered in blood, a dark crimson so warm that it seemed to smoke off his body. She felt her heart climb into her throat. Was he going to hurt her? What was he going to do? And why . . . ?

She glanced over at Clayton's body, at the section of his stomach torn open for display, and felt her own stomach lurch once more.

The man knelt before her.

"W-wh—" she began, but the man held up his hand to silence her. He leaned in next to her face. His eyes, cold and blue and stained red with her assailants' blood. She stared into the bloody eyes of her hero. The lump in her throat, her beating heart, began to fade away, sinking down once more into her chest.

"P-p-please don't hurt m-m—"

The man smiled.

"What's your name?"

His voice was clear, steady.

"B-Betsy," she croaked. "Betsy Wilmot."

The man nodded; stood. He took a few steps

away, knelt to retrieve her canes, and returned. They clattered against the cobblestone beside her.

"I'm not going to hurt you, child."

He placed his hands on her cheeks. They were warm with blood, and she flinched. Her body began to shake.

"Things will be better for you some day."

His hands pulled her head down slightly, and she felt the warmth of his lips on her forehead. A wave of shakes came over her again and she closed her eyes, blinking out tears. He pulled away from her face. She could hear his footsteps. They were light, quick, and she opened her eyes in time to watch him throw on his coat. He turned, looked at her and lit a cigarette. Then, he was gone again, fading back into the shadows.

She sat there for a long time, breathing the air and scent of blood. Soon after she looked to the sky. It was a clear night and, beyond the light of the street lamp, she could make out stars. They became glassy, fuzzy even, as the tears invaded her eyes again.

Betsy leaned back against the wall and began to scream. It came in strained, panic breaths, scratching its way up her throat; there, it expelled itself into the night, forcing her lungs to expand far beyond their normal capacity. Then she gasped for air, wiped the tears from her eyes and screamed some more. This continued for several minutes until her voice collapsed, hoarse.

She sat there against the side of the classroom building, her semi-useless legs sprawled out in front of her. Her head was swimming from lack of oxygen and her chest burned. Still, somewhere in the post-traumatic euphoria, she found she was able to focus on her mother. Her mother, who had always done her best to protect her daughter from the outside world, was completely oblivious to all of this. Sure, she would grow worried as the minutes passed, but she wouldn't budge because her darling daughter had made such a fuss.

Betsy closed her eyes and shook her head.

Stop it! she scolded herself. *Stop thinking that, stupid. Keep it together!* But that was easier said than done. When she opened her eyes again, her gaze fell upon the body of the Jeb. A dark pool of blood was forming underneath his head. She recalled watching the stranger drive his knives deep into Jeb's neck and began to retch. Nothing came.

She swallowed, closed her eyes from the grotesque scene before her and screamed once more.

"Help!"

It erupted from her burning lungs and up her razor-filled throat. She didn't care if her vocal cords corroded after this night, so long as she could get out

one more cry. One more plea. *There has to be someone here*, she thought. *Someone . . .*

"HELP ME!"

That was all. She couldn't bring herself to voice anything more above a whisper. Her chest ached. Fresh tears tumbled down her cheeks. She slowed her breaths to regulate her heart, to stop its interminable pounding in her ears. So she could listen for anyone — voices, footsteps, something — and maybe get their attention. She wasn't sure if she had it in her for another scream, but she would damn well try. *Do*, she told herself. *Like Yoda*.

Betsy smiled. A tiny, raspy laugh was sure to follow, but it never had a chance. Her attention was whisked away by faint voices from afar. Somewhere alongside the classroom building. Her thoughts ran rampant, trying to formulate some mental image of who it might be. History wasn't the only late class. Surely there were others that ended later than her own . . .

"I think it came from over here."

She sucked in her breath. For a moment all she could hear was her pounding heart, and then —

"You sure?"

Another voice. Two people — men, from the sound of it. Relief surged through her, and she felt herself go limp. She relaxed her head against the wall.

"Over here . . ." she croaked. The words came out slow, exhausted. They echoed briefly and faded into the soft, cool breeze. She tried to lean forward and found that she could not. Her body had given up. Resigned to this, Betsy opened her eyes and forced another call into the dark.

"I'm here . . ."

This time it was met with a response.

"Jake, this way!"

Jake, she thought. *That's a nice name*. It made her smile and, once she heard the approaching footsteps, she closed her eyes once more. That was how they found Betsy Wilmot, with her legs sprawled out, head resting against the wall and eyes closed. A smile on her face. Clothes spotted with blood.

And a bloody lip-print on her forehead.

Interlude (1)

He finished his cigarette in three long drags. It was the adrenaline rush and he excused the ravenous need for nicotine. This time. His New Year's Resolution this year had been to quit smoking, but things hadn't gone exactly as planned. But then again, he supposed they never did. Now he needed a cigarette more than ever — if not for the nicotine craving, then for his racing heart.

It had happened faster than expected. He'd been afraid of tripping, of cutting his knuckles with the knives even through the gloves (despite the hours of practice), but no such thing had happened. His targets were dead; their intended victim, saved. Now, as he stood in the shadows of an adjacent building, he rubbed the butt of the cigarette against the wall and put it in his pocket. He reached into the lining of his coat, retrieved a large handkerchief and began to wipe off his face.

Images of their agonized faces flashed through his head, but he remained solemn. The blood he wiped from his face was the blood of filth. He recalled seeing their pictures in the paper a month before. Two grinning faces standing outside a courthouse after being acquitted of multiple rape charges, among other things. That had been the final straw. For years he had done his duty to society — paying taxes, recycling, voting — but every year he sat back and watched as humanity imploded. He remembered a time when there had been real honest-to-God heroes who would save the day by protecting the weak and destroying evil.

Those times, he remembered, were simpler.

Now he witnessed bad men go free, set loose by a system tangled in its own strings. He supposed it had been building up inside for quite some time — maybe even for years — but when he saw those two models of trash walking out of court on the local news that evening, something inside had clicked. It was the largest court case in recent memory. Twelve murder/rapes over a three-month period and enough evidence to convict with a death sentence. And yet there they were in the papers, on television, smiling and thanking the justice system. Not long after, reports were being made about sexual assaults and muggings at the local university.

He paused when the screaming started. At first there was an urge to return to her (Betsy, he recalled, was her name), to help her along her way, but he resisted. She would be fine. He had been walking the campus for several weeks, waiting, watching, trying to pinpoint where they might pop up next (their attacks, thus far, had been irregular). He'd seen her making her way back from class on many occasions. Her mother parked along the street in front of the chemistry lab and waited every evening. There, he suspected, was where her mother waited now, oblivious to the attack on her daughter. Or his own intervention.

Betsy's screams faded. He went back to cleaning his face, content in knowing there were classes later than her own. There would be other students making their way through. Her secret trail back from class wasn't a secret to the rest of the student body.

His resolve to look for them, to lie in wait and pounce once they made their move didn't come to him until it was actually happening. It was only by chance that he'd stopped for smoke in the shadows of the lab. Out of all the places on campus, he figured Betsy's path through the alley and courtyard to be the likeliest place for an attack, but he never expected it to happen this night. He had stopped in the shadows for a quick smoke, and when it had begun to happen right before his eyes, it took a second to register. For a moment he froze like a frightened deer, his mind racing with what-ifs, conscience-weighting possibilities and an overall need — not want, but need — to help this poor girl and stop her assailants. When the one known as Clayton had smacked her head against the wall that last time, he had sprung to action and all thought ceased.

And now, as he wiped their blood from his face, he felt refreshed. Justice, in some form, had been done, and tonight he would sleep knowing that two bits of human garbage had been wiped clean from the earth. Only now he would have to be careful. Though he had taken precautions, she had seen his face. That, he decided, was a chance he was willing to take. If he was caught up in the very system which let Betsy's assailants free, then so be it — he would accept proper punishment. Tonight, though . . .

Tonight he would rest in knowing he'd done right in his wrong.

He lifted the handkerchief to his lips and wet one of the tips with his tongue. Then he ran it against his cheek (the last place he felt any kind of foreign substance) one last time and returned it to his coat lining. It had been quiet for a few minutes now, and he wondered about Betsy. He pictured her still sprawled against the cobblestone, crying, praying for someone to rescue her.

These thoughts pulled at his heart with such relentless force that he could no longer take it. He emerged from his shadowed hiding place and walked toward the street, being sure to keep his head down. The last thing he needed was unwanted attention because he'd happened to miss a spot of blood here and there. Still, he had the cover of night to shroud his face in obscurity.

Ahead of him, just as he'd suspected, was a red pickup truck parked along the sidewalk. The overhead light in the cab was turned on, and he could see the silhouette of Betsy's mother behind the wheel. As he neared, he could make out faint spots of rust on the tailgate. The O in FORD was missing. A soft, muddled thrum of music came to his ears, and he suspected it was something Country. Johnny Cash,

maybe. He paused for a moment to pull his coat closed and conceal his bloody shirt. Now was not the time for oversights.

He approached the driver's side of the cab, being sure to keep his head down. Betsy's mother did not stir, and he found this surprising until, walking closer, he found she was reading a book. That explained the cab light. He stopped short of the door and tapped on the window. It startled Betsy's mother, and he fought the urge to laugh when she dropped the book she was reading. She squinted out the window, frowned, and finally, after several deciding seconds, the window slowly rolled down. He'd been right — she was listening to Johnny Cash. The steady rhythm of "The Man Comes Around" filled the air between them.

"Um . . . can I help you?"

His face grew hot, but he told himself to keep it together. He could tell she was frightened, and understandably so.

He cleared his throat.

"Your daughter is in the alley behind the chemistry lab."

She stared at him, not seeming to comprehend what he was saying. Her eyes were large, white coins sunken into a wrinkled mass of pasty brown clay.

"E-Excuse me?"

"Your daughter," he whispered. "She needs you. Go to her. Now."

He shoved his gloved hands into his pockets and turned. Behind him the cab door opened and Betsy's mother hopped out. Her sneaker-clad feet made dull thuds on the asphalt. She called after him.

"Hey! You come back here —"

He stopped in the middle of the street and turned back to her.

"You heard me, Mrs. Wilmot. Betsy needs you. I suggest you get moving."

She was hesitant at first, contemplating which direction to turn, and then she was off to the chemistry lab, running as fast as her tiny legs would carry her. He continued across the street, stopping just in time to watch her disappear around the corner of the building. He nodded, content with this. Now he knew Betsy would be okay.

As he walked, he contemplated his next move. Tonight was only a means of proving to himself that he was capable of doing this. Whatever "this" was. Though he had been waiting for two weeks, he had made arrangements to leave town immediately following such an event. Now he would do so. Tonight.

And after?

He pulled his coat tighter and smiled.

There were still several more stops to make.